

Sister M. Liguori
Building reading readiness in
blind children.

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*"The plants are looked at so often
—I marvel how they grow!"*



**BUILDING READING
READINESS
IN BLIND CHILDREN**

by Sister M. Liguori



AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

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BUILDING READING READINESS IN BLIND CHILDREN

by Sister M. Liguori

*Sister Liguori is a teacher at the
Most Holy Redeemer School, Evergreen Park, Ill.,
in the parochial school program for the
education of blind with sighted students*

It is important for both parents and teachers to realize that there are many factors which help the child become ready for reading. It is particularly helpful when parents and teachers can talk about them together. I have selected four phases which I feel should be of special interest to you as parents of pre-school blind children.

Probably the most important phase of getting ready to read is learning the proper use of language skills. Most children when they enter school have a fairly good command over their native tongue, but the ability to pronounce and

use words, to make sentences, and to comprehend ideas varies from child to child.

The process of learning to read is one of associating written symbols with their language meanings. Therefore before the child can comprehend the meaning of the printed text he must understand the language patterns which the printed symbols represent.

Since oral language precedes and is basic to printed language, developing in your child a proper use and understanding of the language will better prepare him for a good start in reading.

Every parent should start talking to his child while he is still a baby, otherwise the child is being deprived of an opportunity to learn language. It may seem strange to converse with someone who cannot reply, but every word a parent says makes a vivid impression on the growing child.

Blind children, I feel, even more than sighted children need to be talked to. This not only gives them an opportunity of learning language, but it gives them a feeling of security, of being a part of things.

As you dress or undress your child, and later as he does it himself, name the different articles of clothing he wears, telling him about each one—the color,

kind of material and how they are made; tell him about the food he eats, how it grows, where you buy it, and how it is cooked; as you perform the different household tasks tell him what you are doing, how you are doing it, and maybe even why you are doing it. Many other commonplace affairs of daily life will present themselves about which you can converse with your child, thus building up a vocabulary for him and giving him good language patterns upon which he will unconsciously model his own speech.

Not only should you talk to him, but also give your child a chance to talk—that is, give him a chance to take part in a conversation or to relate a happening—not forcing him to spend hours talking to himself forming unintelligible speech patterns and undesirable speech habits. Consideration for your child's needs and desire to talk when he is young is a big step towards developing the language skills so essential for a good start in reading.

Stories and poems read aloud present a fine opportunity for a child to hear good language patterns. New words are added to the vocabulary, and the reader's pleasant and correct enunciation sets a good example. Poetry is especially

valuable because it encourages and develops a feeling for rhythm and rhyme.

The child who has gained knowledge of common things, on his own age level, through his home and local environment and through trips and visits, is more likely to associate printed word forms with their meanings than one who has had more limited experiences, partly because the child with broader experiences will have more words in his vocabulary and a better understanding of conversation about common things.

RETARDING INFLUENCES

There are many reasons why some children fail to develop normal language patterns, but the one I feel most likely to affect a blind child can be related to emotional disturbance or insecurity.

Perhaps one of the most frequent causes of emotional disturbance in any child is pressure in the home. I think this might be even more true in regard to a blind child. Too often parents of a blind child feel that because he has been deprived of his sight it is necessary for him to be just a little farther along than other children of his age and thus compensate for his handicap. If a child is

pressed to a higher level than he has ability or readiness to achieve, he often becomes either negative and refuses to do what is asked of him or overly anxious and blocked by the tensions he feels. This is especially true in regard to language. Children who are coaxed or nagged to say things beyond their ability become frightened or hostile. Almost any kind of emotional strain may become associated with language and inhibit the child's free self-expression.

Forcing a blind child to learn beyond his ability just to keep ahead of a sighted friend is to be avoided, as is the opposite fault of going to the extreme in protecting him because of his handicap and not requiring him to make any effort to reach his potentialities.

Let your child grow up normally—talking to him and allowing him to talk, reading to him, and giving him opportunities for experiences—and he will have a good knowledge of the language skills necessary for getting ready to read.

LEARNING TO LOOK

Another phase of getting ready to read, probably of equal importance to the blind child as learning language

skills, is learning to look carefully. For the sighted child, reading calls for accurate visual discrimination. One has to see words to read them; one must train his eyes to move properly across the page, keep words in focus and distinguish the tiny characters that make one word different from another.

For your child, reading calls for accurate tactual discrimination. The blind child must feel words to read them; he must learn to move his fingers properly across a page and to distinguish the position of tiny dots that make one word different from another. It is during his preschool days that these fingers receive their first learning experience, and the more careful and wide this learning has been, the better prepared will he be to see the more detailed and minute differences encountered in the art of reading.

To discriminate accurately is often a difficult task for a young reader, sighted or blind, for words, whether they be in inkprint or braille, often look very much alike. This is easy to understand when we remember that all printed words are composed of different selections and arrangements of twenty-six letters, while all brailled words are composed of different combinations of only six-raised dots.

You will frequently hear me refer to your child as seeing, and you will notice that he reacts to new situations by telling you what he sees. Of course he comprehends through his sense of touch in his reading and in all of his experiences just as his sighted classmates do when they use their vision. If you can think of this as his way of learning to read, you can respect the braille system for him just as you do the printed page for your sighted children.

PLANNED EXPERIENCE

From his babyhood days a blind child should not only be helped to look at things properly, but should be given ample opportunities for seeing things—for it is such carefully planned opportunities that will start those little fingers examining in a way that is meaningful.

Just as the visual abilities of sighted children vary greatly when they enter school, so do the tactual abilities of blind children vary. This is due largely to the differing experiences the children have had in what they have seen and how they have reacted to their impressions. Some children who have been helped in the early years have developed

habits of careful observation and scrutiny of details. Others react only to the gross tactual differences between objects.

One of the most fascinating experiences for me in the classroom is to be a silent observer when several youngsters are looking at something for the first time. During the past year we received a set of scale model wild animals made of rubber. The varied reactions when these animals were examined revealed a great deal. In looking at the elephant for instance, all commented on the size, and the majority recognized the trunk. But for some that was all. Others continued to look at it, and each time their fingers carefully went over the whole form something new was discovered until the large ears had been identified, the opening in the trunk, the tusks and the hoofs had been noticed. All these details were not familiar to the children, but their early training in careful observation led them to discover them, then questions were asked and much worthwhile information obtained.

All children profit from games and experiences that will prepare for specific skills needed in beginning reading—experiences that will develop more accurate discrimination of details such

as size, shape, position, and place relationship.

For this the most ordinary objects can be used to advantage. Let a child compare his shoes, coat, hat and galoshes with those of his parents or younger brother for discrimination of size. A pile of lids from the kitchen drawer will not only lead to discrimination of size, but will start these little fingers to detect the shape of an object. Mother's pans will again teach size—large and small—as well as depth—shallow and deep—and kind of material—the iron skillet and the aluminum kettle. There is a wealth of experiences to be gained from a careful study of the various tables and chairs in the home—discrimination of size, shape and height.

May I add here that as the child grows, I think he should be encouraged to become familiar with every object in the home. A sighted child can see everything. Even though he may not be allowed to handle everything at all times—he at least knows it is there and what it looks like. A blind child should be allowed to look at everything at all times. But he, just like the sighted child, wants to know what is there and what it looks like. I do not think you have to be afraid of things being broken if he has been taught how to look carefully

from the first. The children in our classroom are allowed to look at various objects around the room whenever they wish, the only reminder being to look carefully, and this is given only during the first weeks of school. So far nothing has been broken except a vase that Sister knocked over. I can assure you that nothing is missed as the children make the rounds of the room almost daily. There are two plants on a little cupboard that are looked at so often I marvel how they grow. But they do, and the youngsters keep me informed whenever a new leaf appears on them. Their surprise and delight when they discover something new is worth seeing, and the telling about these discoveries to their sighted friends is a means of growing in conversation. The same will happen if they are allowed to look and discover at home.

A collection of buttons could serve to teach shape (round, square, or oblong) or size (large or small, big or little). If the collection contains some fancy buttons it could even start the child in interior discrimination, noting the design on the button or the number of holes in the center. This would afford a good start toward later discrimination between the letters in a word. Pieces of cardboard or cloth cut in different

sizes and shapes will not only help their fingers to discriminate between round, square, and oblong, large and small, little and big, but will also teach them the difference in materials.

Any toy or game that will aid the fingers to become more sensitive and relaxed will prove of great use to the blind child. I might suggest here the use of blocks of different sizes, clay modeling, the sand pile, and puzzles.

Making use of the child's natural interest in all he sees in a comfortable environment should be a joyous experience for the parent as well as for the child.

AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION

Another phase of getting ready to read is learning to listen carefully. Keen ears are vital to reading because a child who hears words correctly can use what he hears as a clue for identifying a printed word. This kind of listening and hearing means being able to separate and identify different sounds, to compare them according to their loudness, pitch and duration. Later on, power to attack and read new words independently will rest on the child's ability to hear the sounds in the different

parts of a word and associate these sounds with the letters in the word.

Rarely does a child upon entering school possess this ability of fine discrimination. He must gain it by learning to listen in his pre-school days to the difference in sounds made by various things such as the howling of the wind, the low growl of a dog, the light tinkling of a bell, the shrill whistle of a siren, the roll of thunder, the hum of a motor, or the rumble of a passing train. The greater the experience the child has had in such listening, the sooner he will be able to start reading and the greater progress he will make.

However, in providing these experiences for a blind child, unless he has actual contact with the object making the new sound, it must be identified for him.

EXPERIENCES IN SOUND

The home can provide the first experiences that will start the development in learning to listen carefully. Be proud when the child distinguishes the voices of father, mother, brother and sister, and then of relatives. Help him to distinguish the sounds heard around the house, such as the whir of the sew-

ing machine, the singing of the tea kettle, the ticking of the clock, the click of the light switch, the whir of the motor of the vacuum sweeper, the deep-freeze and the washing machine. Numerous experiences in listening carefully can be discovered while in the yard or on the porch—the shouts of children playing, the tread of feet passing by, the clang of the fire engine, the noise of machines. With time, the child, if guided to listen carefully, will be able to notice variations in these sounds—were the children happy or excited; were there many or few people passing; were they hurrying or strolling; was it a bus, car or large “semi” that passed?

As he is able to make these distinctions in preschool days, think how much greater his ability will be to distinguish between the sounds of words when he starts reading.

Numerous trips to the zoo will make the child familiar with the sounds of the different animals—he will soon recognize the roar of the lion, the chattering of the monkey, the growl of the bear, the scolding of Polly Parrot. Trips to the country prove just as helpful in becoming familiar with the sounds peculiar to the farm animal as the cluck of the hen, the neighing of the horse, the bleating of the lamb, the mooing of

the cow, the grunting of the pig. When it is impossible to take these trips, a substitute may be found in the use of records that give an excellent recording of these various sounds.

When a new sound has been heard, help the child compare it with a known sound. This affords excellent training for future comparing of the parts of words.

Besides being able to distinguish one sound from another, the child needs experience in being able to compare sounds according to loudness, pitch and duration. Have him compare the sound made by the ticking of an alarm clock and that of a wrist watch; the ring of a real telephone and that of a play one; the toot of the horn on an auto and one on his brother's bicycle; the ringing of a doorbell and of a jingle bell. Connect the words *louder* and *softer* with each pair of sounds.

An airplane passing over the house affords an opportunity to compare how loud the noise is when the plane is overhead and how it gets softer as the plane goes farther away.

Differences in pitch can be observed in the human voice. Father's voice may be low and deep, while mother's may be high and soft. Comparing the differences in pitch in the voice of the charac-

ters in certain stories proves both interesting and helpful. Take the story of the Three Bears—a favorite with all children. This story owes its charm largely to the differences in pitch of the voices of Father Bear, Mother Bear, Baby Bear and Goldilocks.

If a child learns to recognize these differences between sounds in his preschool days, he will be ready for the greater discrimination of sounds when he enters school—that of making the finer judgments and discriminations necessary to hear within the total auditory impression of a word the initial and final sounds, and to detect slight sound differences between words.

INTERPRETATIVE DEVELOPMENT

If reading is to serve any purpose, the child must learn to interpret what he reads. This interpretation becomes the heart of reading and as such should be a central part of getting ready to read.

At the preschool level, pictures and life experiences take the place of the printed text, but the thinking processes of interpretation are much the same as will be used later when the child actually reads.

I do not want you to become disturbed over the important part pictures play in preparing a child for reading. It is true a blind child cannot enjoy pictures as a sighted one does, but from observation I feel that most blind children can and do derive more pleasure and information from looking at objects than sighted children do, and thus nothing is lost from not being able to see pictures. It would be well to remember here, however, that since he cannot see pictures, a blind child needs more experiences than even a sighted child does.

Pictures, as well as printed words, derive their meaning from the child's ability to bring to mind relevant associations. At any reading level a child can interpret content only by relating that content to previous experiences and understandings that he remembers. The new content can then be integrated with past relevant associations and is held in memory for use in future interpretations.

In forming good habits of interpretations, it is essential from the very beginning that children be able to bring to mind pertinent facts concerning the character and activities they will encounter in each story—be it a picture story or one in print.

Trips and excursions to places where children may actually see the items that will be featured in stories they will soon be reading are valuable in building correct concepts. Let the children come in actual contact with a cow, chickens, a boat, train, a store, the animals in a zoo, a barn, fire engine, milk truck, an elevator, an escalator. Many of these trips can and should be made before the child starts school. He will then have a better experimental background which will enrich his interpretative powers. When he starts reading he will not just be reading words—those words will be full of meaning for him.

I have two children in mind who are examples of possessing varying degrees of interpretative powers. The one was a so-called "good reader"—he could read page after page seldom missing a word. But he read just words. There was not a change of expression on his face or in his voice to show that he was getting any enjoyment out of what he was reading. When questioned about the story he was seldom able to give a correct answer. That child read merely words. The other child was only an "average" reader, occasionally missing a word. But it was a delight to hear and see her read. Whether she were reading aloud

or silently one could hear a little chuckle when something in the story amused her; a smile would light up her face when she came to a part that particularly pleased her. If she were reading aloud her voice showed all the excitement that she felt within. She could relate the minutest details of the story correctly. That child truly read—her interpretative powers had been developed well.

Possibly some of you have been waiting for me to say something about learning braille as a step in getting ready to read. In my discussion of the four phases of getting ready to read, I have not mentioned the learning of braille even once. The blind child best prepared to start reading may be one who has never even heard of braille. Because of the wise guidance of his parents, his preschool days have been happy, normal ones spent with sighted friends and companions, doing what they do and going where they go. His experiences have been varied and numerous, and so his language skills, his tactual skills, his auditory skills and his interpretative skills have been developing properly as he was growing, and when at six he entered school he was ready to enjoy the new experience—learning to read.

It is my sincere hope and desire that this will be the situation for your child. If it is, I can assure you that he will make progress that will delight you, his parents, and his teacher. Greater than this, he will learn to live and grow as a normal happy child sharing and using God's gifts to man.

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270 Broadway

New York 7, New York

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